FAITHFUL DOUBTING

April 6, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"Unless I see in his hands the print of nails,...I will not believe."
--John 20:25 (RSV)

Scripture
John 20:19-31

Joseph Meister is probably not a name you recognize. Joseph Meister was a little boy who survived because a scientist engaged in faithful and courageous doubting. Louis Pasteur injected the lethal virus that causes rabies into Joseph Meister's body in 1802. It was an act that violated all the rules and conventions of medical science, not to mention common sense.

Pasteur was convinced that disease results from germs which multiply in the body. He had evidence that a weakened strain of those micro-organisms placed in an animal's body stimulated a wonderfully combative response which resisted the disease. He called the startling new practice vaccination and he had successfully vaccinated sheep against anthrax.

In 1882 he turned his attention to rabies, one of the most dread diseases of his age. He worked tirelessly to isolate the microbe. And then one day little Joseph Meister was bitten by a rabid dog, a fatal occurrence which ordinarily would have resulted in his painful death. But his parents had heard about Pasteur's research and came to the famous scientist and begged him to try to save their son. After intense personal struggle and doubt, Louis Pasteur did the unthinkable. He injected a small amount of rabies virus under Joseph Meister's skin. He did it a number of times during the next several weeks. The result was also unthinkable. Joseph Meister did not contract rabies. Pasteur had doubted the wisdom of his day, courageously and faithfully.

A little doubt, by and large, is a healthy attribute. The history of medicine, what Lewis Thomas calls our Youngest Science, is essentially the story of those courageous people who were willing to doubt what was regarded as the truth. It wasn't long ago in the sweep of history, after all, that we believed blood washed back and forth in the body like the tides of the ocean and that draining some was a healthy thing to do, or that holes drilled in the skull would relieve the pressure of migraine.

In the public world of politics skepticism is not the problem - gullibility is. The consistent culprit in history is the willingness of people to believe what they are told. Adolf Hitler said it...the greater

the lie and the more often it is repeated the more believable it will become - and then demonstrated it. Free societies depend on the doubters, the skeptics who call everything into question, who do not assume something to be true simply because it is said by a cabinet official or a general or a press secretary or a President. I had a professor of political science who said once that the main reason Nazism could not have succeeded here is that American skepticism would have snorted in disrespect at goose-steping storm troopers and responded to the ridiculously excessive claims of fascism with a healthy, "Oh, yeah? Prove it." It is very difficult to know the truth about what is actually happening in Central America - when there is a 180 degree differential in the story - the facts - as they are told by our government, and our own press. It is, it seems to me, a time for healthy skepticism.

There is a role for doubt in religion. It is essentially a healthy role. It is, first, to call into question every assumption of authority in the name of God. It is to raise embarrassing objections when religion assumes that it knows what is best for all the people, including restricting the rights of people and sometimes the lives of people. It is to ask, gently but firmly, that the claims of religion be made at least in conversation with free intellectual inquiry and honest dialogue, and when religion seems to say you must believe what you cannot force yourself to believe, the situation needs a strong and faithful soul to stand up and say, "I object."

Faithful doubting is not always fun. In fact it would seem that doubt is a condition religion ought to alleviate. It would seem that the gift of faith ought to deliver us from the discomfort of doubt. My suggestion this morning is that the opposite is nearer the truth: that there is such a thing as faithful doubting. It's patron saint is a fascinating character named Thomas, one of the twelve, whose consistent skepticism has earned him the nickname, "Doubting Thomas."

There is a body of intriguing lore about Thomas. One of the oldest legends is that the disciples met after the crucifixion and resurrection to divide the world among themselves for missionary work. Thomas was given India and ancient tradition has him traveling as far as China. None of it can be proven. It doesn't appear to the scholarly community that any of it is true. But when Vasco de Gama and his Portuguese explorers finally arrived in India around 1500 they were astonished to discover that the Christian church was already there, had been there, in fact, for a thousand years, and did attribute its founding to St. Thomas.

There is nothing documented about Thomas after the resurrection but there are several intriguing references prior to the passion in the Gospel narrative. When several disciples advised Jesus not to go to Judea because of the danger of arrest - it was Thomas who rallied them and said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." There is nothing gullible, naive or polyannish about that.

At the last supper Jesus was talking about his death and what was ahead and Thomas wasn't getting it and so he blurted out, "Lord, we don't know where you are going: how can we know the way," to which Jesus responded, "I am the way; the truth, the life."

And then Thomas turns up missing from the room in which the disciples were hiding after the curcifixion. I imagine this strong, painfully honest skeptic, unable to bear the passivity and deathly confinement of that place, risking - almost flaunting - his personal safety - by walking the streets; I imagine him lost in his mental anguish, wondering how he - the committed skeptic - had been taken in by the implausible dream. The Galilean he had followed for three years was dead. So were his words. His ideas. His hopes. It is no surprise that when Thomas returned to join the others in that hiding place, and they tried to tell him that Jesus had been there, alive, he could not, would not, believe it. Not until he saw the evidence, the almost clinically physical evidence, would he believe it.

I like knowing that. I'm glad Thomas was there and I'm grateful that the New Testament is honest enough to remember his story. It's helpful to know that the people around Jesus were not stained glass saints. They were not gullible. They are slow to give up preconceived notions, reluctant to trust the power of powerless love, protective of their own safety. They fall asleep at inappropriate times, interrupt sublime moments with tasteless arguing, and finally, stubbornly refuse to believe. Luke remembers that they thought the first reports of the resurrection were idle chatter. Matthew describes the Risen Christ standing in the middle of the disciples and "they worshipped him, even though some of them doubted." That's an incredible statement - standing right there looking at him and still doubting. I love that incident. They sound like you and me.

I conclude, at least, that faith and doubt are not opposites, that they are not incompatible. I would suggest that sometimes they are complementary, that there is a creative counterpartal tension between them. But it is not easy to sustain that tension. There is, in fact, a strong appeal today to religion that will resolve that tension; religion that provides certainty. There is a deep human need for something, anything, we can know for sure. And there is a popular and powerful public assumption that right religion will produce it. Sometimes that assumption emerges even for those of us who know better, but can't help regard with envy our friends who have been saved from uncertainty and delivered into a promised land where everything is clear and simple and where there is no more doubt.

One of the reasons the behavioral sciences are often suspicious of religion is that history teaches us to beware of the people who have religious certainty on their side. The ultra-conservative Protestants of Northern Ireland have no uncertainty at all about what is true theologically and what is right politically. The people who planted a bomb under the seat of an airliner last week are not bothered by doubts. Religious fundamentalism is endangering our world. Whatever its denomination: Moslem, Christian, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic - religion that has no room in it for a dissenting opinion, for honest doubt, is a great and profound tragic threat to peace and life itself.

Beyond the public and political reasons there are, it seems to me, good, sound theological reasons for celebrating faithful doubting and honest skepticism. Apart from it, you and I are inclined to come to our religious conclusions on the basis of our feelings alone. If we can't "know" the truth of religion in the same way, for instance, as we "know" the existence

of this building, these pews, this pulpit, we ought at least to be able to "feel" its truth emotionally. It's one of the most serious problems thinking people have with religion. Sometime popular religion seems to say that the way to resolve this dilemma is to stop thinking about it and concentrate on "feeling it": park your intellect on the steps outside and bring only your emotions to God. Professor Joseph Sittler, reflecting on that favorite old hymn "Blessed Assurance" wrote: "this hymn suggests that nothing Christian is authentic until it has become a blessed assurance in some warm, pervasive, crucial experience... the temptation is to hang the reality of God...on...the immediacy of a feeling." And then he shows what has made him one of the great theological thinkers for our time by asking: "Is the opulence of the grace of God to be measured by my inventory? Is the great catholic faith of nineteen centuries to be reduced to my internal dimensions?" [Grace Notes, pp. 48, 50-51]

The faith is bigger than our doubts. The truth is larger than our questions and more comprehensive than our capacity to comprehend or feel. If my emotions are the arbiter, what happens when my emotions are agitated, provoked, bent out of shape? Robert McAfee Brown, quipped somewhere that the brave declaration "God is Dead" says more about the person making the statement than it does about God. And there has always been a suspicion among historians and theologians that Martin Luther's occasional harshness and morbidity was due, in part, to persistent gastro-intestinal distress. The best traditions of Protestantism have always wanted to hold up to the clear light of reason, for examination, for questioning, individual experiences of revelation before they are superimposed as normative for others.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. It never has been. The issue is very contemporary although the text - the incident is nearly 2,000 years old. Catholic New Testament scholar Raymond E. Brown suggests that a helpful way to view this story of Thomas and the Risen Christ is as the author using a first century stage to address an audience: "seated in the darkened theatre of the future, silently viewing what Jesus was saying and doing. But now, as the curtain is about to fall on this stage drama, the lights in the theatre are suddenly turned on. Jesus shifts his attention from the disciples on the stage to the audience." [The Gospel According to John, Vol. II, p. 1048]

That's us, that is to say, sitting here thinking about events that happened 2,000 years ago and struggling, I would submit, as Thomas did, with the basic believability of it all. The theologians and preachers can drone on that it is the wrong question. But it is the question we ask. Did it happen? That is the seasonal variation of the deeper, fundamental question which is asked today with vigor and openness and candor. It is the question of the existence of God, the reality of the transcendent, the silence and absence of God in a world that is radically secular. The "Death of God" movement was evidence of the struggle. The issue - for us, sitting in the theatre with the lights suddenly turned up, is very basic. Can I believe it? It is a struggle that goes on in the secret places of many an honestly faithful heart.

If that is your struggle please know that you are not alone. I keep close at hand for my own use a wonderful excerpt from a letter Dostoevski

wrote more than a century ago: "As far as I am concerned I look upon myself as a child of the age, a child of unbelief and doubt: it is probably I shall remain so to my dying day. I have been tortured with longing to believe - am so, indeed, even now; and the yearning grows stronger, the more cogent the intellectual difficulties that stand in the way... And yet God sometimes sends me moments of complete serenity. It is in such moments that I have composed in my mind a profession of faith." [see Wm. Hamilton, New Optimism, on The Death of God, T. J. J. Altizer and W. Hamilton]

Please hear the Good News on the Second Sunday of Eastertide. It is that a strong and faithful disciple had trouble believing. Please hear the good news that faith and doubt are not opposites. There is room within faith for strenuous doubt. There is in the body of Christ an honorable vocation of faithful doubting - its patron saint is Thomas our brother.

And then please hear the Good News that there are moments of serenity, of luminous clarity, even of certainty. They are given to us, as they were to Thomas, when we are together: When we rise and sing one of the great hymns of the Church and feel at one with one another and with that great communion of the faithful who help us believe.

There are, moments thank God, sometimes fleeting - but with enough sharpness in them to redeem all the other moments when doubting and ascertaining and struggling and agonizing and intellectualizing are suspended for a graceful season and faith is given and we know Thomas' confession as our own - "My Lord and my God."

They happen for many of us when we hear an invitation across 20 centuries - "see my hands - my feet - come to me - eat this bread - drink this cup - know that

I am

and that I am with you forever.

Amen.